

A chicken in every pot and an ad on every page

Selling political advertising

Just in case you've just returned from an extended space mission or have been recently rescued from a desert island, there will be an election in 2008. The presidential wannabees of both parties have been campaigning for at least the last ten years (or so it seems). The national candidates spend most of their money on broadcast media but local candidates with limited budgets and smaller constituencies need to find other means to get their message out. This is where free and community papers can support the democratic process while adding a few extra dollars to the bottom line.

“All politics is local” – Tip O’Neil

Our publications are a perfect fit for most local candidates. They cannot afford broadcast advertising and production costs make even cable programs prohibitively expensive. Many candidates purchase ads in metro newspapers, but the high cost per column inch often leads them to run infrequent small ads that are lost in the clutter of the paper. Local candidates need to focus their efforts on the communities they hope to serve; most of the coverage offered by these media is wasted. The targeted local coverage and greater value offered by community papers is ideal for the person running for local leadership positions. We give candidates a way to be a big frog in the little pond of voters they need to reach. Local papers are closely identified with the communities they serve, so the candidate can deliver their message in a positive context. Daily papers are full of doom and gloom news – our papers are full of ways to save money and information on what is happening in the community. This not only drives readership but voters will see the candidate's ad when they are in a positive frame of mind.

Who's on the ballot?

One of the biggest challenges in selling political ads is finding and reaching the candidates. Most local candidates don't have a campaign headquarters you can visit. To reduce costs, they generally run their campaigns from their homes. To reach these candidates you need to do a little detective work. First identify the political districts best served by your publications. This information can be obtained from local government offices which can also provide lists of registered candidates from the public record.

Make some calls to state or county political parties. They will be able to give you a list of party endorsed candidates and their contact information. Also find out who is responsible for getting out the vote for the party. If you can demonstrate your ability to reach enough voters you may be able to get some money from the party for group ads. A single ad featuring all of the “Endorsed Candidates” for a district will be much more cost effective than individual ads for each person running. This practice also allows new candidates to “ride on the coat-tails” of popular incumbents.

In many areas the League of Women Voters is an excellent source of information on candidates running for office. Their information, as well as public or party records, is often available online. Another source of information on local candidates is your existing business contacts. Many small business people are very active in the political life of their community. They are very tuned in to what's happening in the neighborhood and may be able to tell you who is running and how to get in touch with them. You'll find many business people also hold office or sit on community boards.

Let me tell you about our candidate

Most people running for local office are not professional politicians. Most are fulltime working people or professionals who serve their communities in their free time. They choose to run for office not for personal gain, but because they feel they can make a difference for their families and their neighbors. They personally bear most of the expense of running for office so they have limited budgets. First time candidates usually have no experience with self-promotion or designing a marketing program. Typically they try to spread their message through roadside posters or with ads in daily newspapers. They choose these methods because they have seen other candidates use them. For this reason it is important to contact office seekers as early as possible in the campaign season. Your goal should be to educate the candidate to the advantages of using your publication before they have committed their budget.

Your campaign strategy

Here are several suggestions to help you sell political candidates:

- Write out a list of the benefits your publication offers political advertisers. Use this to build a presentation.
- Collect any data you have available from audits or other research that may be of interest to office seekers. You can get the number of registered voters from local election records and you can get additional data from the web.
- Often election records only give the candidate's mailing address and not their phone number. Draft a form letter detailing your publication's strengths and emphasizing the value you offer that can be mailed to office seekers.
- When meeting with candidates adopt a consultative approach. Show them how you can help them achieve their goals. Offer your expertise in crafting their message and getting it into the voter's hands.

Getting out the vote

Political candidates frequently know very little about communicating their message to the public. Remember, selling a candidate has much in common with selling a product. Candidates should consider the following points:

- Use your creative staff to design professional and attractive materials for the candidate.
- Candidates should clearly define the main focus of their campaign and build their campaign around this message. "Vote for John Smith and hold the line on taxes" "Vote for Mary Jones, she cares about our schools."
- Create an identity for the candidate using photos and biographical information.
- Avoid attack ads; these can easily sour voters on your candidate.



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- Name recognition is often the key to winning an election. To increase the visibility of your candidate you should recommend a program of ads to run in the weeks leading up to the election. Finish with a big push in the last issue before Election Day. This frequency will reach more voters and implant the candidate's message in the minds of the voters.
- The next campaign begins when the polls close. Suggest that your candidate runs a "Thanks for your support" ad in the issue immediately following the election.

Stay on the right side of the law

Make sure you comply with all laws concerning political advertising. Generally these mandate identifying who is paying for the ad ("Paid for by the committee to elect John Smith"), that ads be paid in advance and that no false statements be made concerning opponents. It is wise to check with your local election authorities to be sure your policies are in compliance with all applicable regulations.

My fellow Americans, in conclusion I would like to say...

I believe free and community papers represent some of the best things about our country. Ours is an industry that is made up of hardworking, entrepreneurs that make their living by providing a valuable service to their communities. We usually provide our readers with information that can be used to select a new car or the best restaurant, by running political ads we provide our readers with the information they need to select the future leaders of their communities.